

# Joseph M. Spivey, IV

September 13, 2024

Mr. John D. Adams, President  
V.M.I. Board of Visitors  
Virginia Military Institute  
P.O. Box 932  
Lexington, VA 24450

Re: Board of Visitors Meeting September 16, 2024

Mr. Adams, Members of the Board,

I request the Board of Visitors reverse its 2017 decision<sup>i</sup> characterizing Sir Moses Ezekiel's '866 statue *Virginia Mourning Her Dead* as a monument representing all Alumni killed in the service of the nation. The statue should be returned to its original, inspirational condition solely representing the cadets killed during the Battle of New Market. The VMI Archives makes this statement.<sup>ii</sup> The Board of Visitors should ensure *Virginia Mourning Her Dead* represents what VMI requested, what Ezekial created, and who it honors.

In 2017 the Board chose to retain the memorial on Post but decided to amend what it represents. Currently, VMI characterizes the statue as an all-inclusive, generic homage to former and future Alumni who make the ultimate sacrifice in service to the nation. Saying the statue represents all Alumni is wrong on at least three points. First, it is insincere. Do the Washington Monument or Lincoln Memorial represent all presidents? Second, it is materially incorrect. The only plaques affixed to the monument are those referencing the New Market cadets. Other conflict-related commemorative plaques reside in various locations about Post. How can one monument be representative of all Alumni when a multitude of remembrances exist? Third, stating the statue represents anyone or anything beyond the ten cadets who died at the Battle of New Market is an effort to “contextualize” it and is a glaring example of presentism.

Merriam-Webster's defines ‘contextualize’ as a transitive verb, “to place (something, such as a word or activity) in a context.” It defines ‘context’ as, “the interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs.” What “interrelated conditions” explain young boys charging directly into the face of musket and cannon fire? What context is required for a memorial honoring the dead created by someone who fought with the deceased? This work of art celebrates timeless virtues of comradery, honor, and selfless service. Why does VMI even want to provide an alternative story about *Virginia Mourning Her Dead*?

In 1893 VMI requested Ezekiel design a memorial for the New Market cadets killed during the battle. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, who has knowledge or understanding about conversations, discussions, or events happening over 130 years ago? At the time of its request there was no intent by VMI to use *Virginia Mourning Her Dead* as a one-size-fits-all memorial. Why did the Board in 2017 think it enjoyed knowledge or understanding sufficient to reinterpret Ezekiel's creation?

In the Board of Visitors Post approved Facilities Master Plan Update, January 2024 on page 4, is the sentence “Essential experiences with Barracks, the parade ground, field training exercises, academic classrooms and faculty offices, and interaction with **monuments and plaques, which emphasize history, tradition, and the VMI heritage.**” (emphasis mine) By stating *Virginia Mourning Her Dead* honors all deceased Alumni from all the nation's conflicts, VMI is attempting to revise its history, make it palatable to small segments of the American public, and obscure the facts about why the monument exists. Further,

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as the number of Alumni who die defending the country grows over time, what happens to the memorial's meaning for the New Markets cadets? Will it resonate as Ezekiel intended or will it become a mere footnote, ten forgotten names?

The Board of Visitors' 2017 decision was wrong. The Board's action was disrespectful, based on unfounded fear, crafted for convenience, and made for political expediency. During its April 2022 meeting Board member Mr. Richard Hines '66, then chairman of the ad hoc Commemorations and Memorials Naming and Review Committee, stated in part, "...other than the imagery venerating Stonewall Jackson as a Confederate, or the Confederacy or slavery generally, the complicated history of VMI is not being erased from VMI's post." But that statement isn't true. If it were true, in 2024 VMI would not be saying *Virginia Mourning Her Dead* represents something other than the ten cadets killed at New Market. By repeating that narrative VMI is trying to conceal facts and erase the history about *Virginia Mourning Her Dead*.

The Board of Visitors should immediately remove this blanket commemorative extension from *Virginia Mourning Her Dead*. It should direct the cessation of references to deceased Alumni unassociated with New Market. It should restore the memorial to Ezekial's original intent and recognize only Ezekial's comrades in arms.

Fortunately, the Board and VMI are concerned about the absence on Post of a monument or tribute directly honoring deceased Alumni. There are various tributes about Post, and among them is a pair of plaques fastened to the arch at Third Barracks.<sup>iii</sup> These commemorations and plaques honor Alumni who have died in the nation's various conflicts. Still, is this the best location, one of the barracks' arches? I don't think it is. It's my opinion the best location for a monument is the courtyard fronting Marshall Hall.

This open space, presently unadorned with any memorial, is the best location for a defining monument representing the Alumni who have given their last full measure for the country. Its design, development, and future site, in accordance with General Order 36, should begin now, so its installation can coincide with completion of the Center for Leadership and Ethics phase 2, Peay Hall. In conjunction with its construction, VMI plans to relocate the VMI Museum's artifacts from Memorial Hall. Installing an expressive, inclusive monument in the courtyard representing the Alumni who have given their last full measure for the country, will tie it to Marshall Hall's Hall of Valor and the VMI Museum, yielding an incredible opportunity to fully tell the story of VMI's heritage, traditions, and history.

Sincerely,



Joseph M. Spivey, IV  
VMI Class of 1985

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<sup>i</sup> [Richmond Times-Dispatch](#)

<sup>ii</sup> [Statues and Monuments at VMI - VMI Archives - Virginia Military Institute](#)

<sup>iii</sup> [Institute Report. October 2011 - VMI Publications Digital Archives - VMI Archives Digital Collections](#)